

“Biblical Empiricism” And The Existence of God

Can God Be Experienced Empirically?



Empirical Knowledge

Have you ever tried to explain a concept or a belief to someone, only to have that person say something like, “OK, show me” or “I’ll believe it when I see it”? It seems that all of us as humans (who live in a visible, physical world) have a strong desire to confirm the truth of something with some sort of SENSORY experience. We want to see it, touch it, smell it, taste it, or hear it. Before we will believe something, (before we will come to know if something is true), we want some sort of ‘empirical’ (sensory) confirmation.

“Empiricism” is a theory about knowledge that emphasizes the role of experience and evidence, especially the role of ‘sensory perception’; our ability to experience something with one of our five senses. For many of us who are dedicated to a scientific view of the world, ‘evidence’ that cannot be physically experienced with our senses is of little value. Many of us would actually make the claim that unless we can see it or touch it, for example, we simply won’t believe it.

The sciences themselves are committed to this view of knowledge, embracing what most of us know as the “scientific method”; an approach to knowledge that requires that all hypotheses and theories must be tested against observations of the natural world. Scientists who employ the “scientific method” are not allowed to trust their prior or existing reasoning, intuition, or revelation. They must ultimately measure their experiments against what they learn from their senses, so science is essentially ‘empirical’ by nature.



The Difference Between Materialism and Immaterialism

Now it seems reasonable that we might use an empirical methodology (that relies on our physical senses) in order to ‘know’ and understand physical, material things in our world. After all, these kinds of things can actually be experienced with our senses. But there is a big difference between material things like, say, a baseball, and immaterial things like, say, GOD! Is it fair to maintain that immaterial things can only be known using five senses that are locked in our material experience? Is it fair to maintain that the immaterial must somehow be measured by a materialistic methodology? How can God be experienced in an empirical way?

Now some would simply argue that nothing immaterial exists in the first place. For these folks, we might simply ask the question, “Is that alleged truth (that nothing immaterial exists) a material entity?” Are concepts and principles (such as the laws of logic), material entities? We’ve taken some time to examine the issue of “dualism” HERE, and this question (whether or not the immaterial, unseen world actually exists) is foundational to the Christian Worldview.

If we are going to try to answer this question and examine the possibility that something immaterial like God could actually exist and be known, it seems that we are going to have to do one of two things: look to something OTHER than empiricism as a methodology, or

embrace a BROADER understanding of what it means to experience something with our senses. If we take the second approach, we will find that the Biblical record actually encourages a broad empirical approach to knowing God and discovering His Existence!



"Biblical Empiricism"

A careful reading of the Scriptures reveals that God understands our desire to experience things (including the truth of His existence) with our senses. In fact, the Bible is filled with sensory descriptions related to the experience of knowing God. But remember, God is NOT a material entity, so we must BROADEN our thinking on sensory experience to encompass the IMMATERIAL world. Check it out:

1 Seeing

Jesus encouraged Philip to SEE God, even though the scriptures are clear in their declaration that God is a Spirit and has never been 'seen':



John 14:6-9

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me. If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him." Philip said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

So how, exactly, can an invisible God be seen? Think of your sight in a broader way. Have you ever struggled to learn something and eventually understood the concept and found yourself saying, "I see!"? Well, you are starting to stretch your concept of sight in a way that will help you to use this sensory perception in a Biblical way. According to Jesus, we simply need to look at the Son in order to see the Father. Jesus possessed all the attributes of the Father (more on this HERE), so we can 'see' God (understand His nature) by looking at his earthly manifestation, Jesus Christ. For the skeptic, is there a way to test this? Well, one way might be to think about the characteristics an all-powerful God might possess and then simply see if Jesus possesses those characteristics (more on that HERE).

"Biblical Empiricism" encourages us to move beyond the 'material' and investigate the 'immortal' by reasoning with our rational minds; "seeing" then becomes a way of 'discerning the true character of something'



2 Smelling

The Bible also appeals to our sense of 'smell' to determine if God exists. Paul describes an 'aroma' of knowledge:



2 Corinthians 2:13-17

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in His triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death

to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things? For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God.

So how, exactly, can God's existence be determined through our sense of smell? Well, we are first going to have to think of our 'olfactory' abilities in a broader way. How many times have you experienced something terrible and said, "That STINKS!"? See, you are already using your senses in a broader way. In this passage of Scripture, Paul is saying that believers, when truly transformed by the Spirit of God, demonstrate a character that saturates their environment like a sweet aroma. When this happens, the unbelieving world comes to a knowledge of Jesus through the sweet aroma they smell in the lives of Jesus' followers. If skeptic wanted to test this idea, he or she would simply need to examine the TRUE impact that Christian believers have had on the world, in spite of the claims that many non-believers might make about the impact of Christianity (more on that HERE). If God exists, we should expect to 'smell' him in the world in which we live, through the lives of those who are dedicated to Him...

"Biblical Empiricism" encourages us to move beyond the 'material' and investigate the 'immaterial' by reasoning with our rational minds; "smelling" then becomes a way of 'determining the moral truth of something'.

3 | Touching

Following Jesus' resurrection, one of his disciples, Thomas, doubted that he had truly been crucified and killed on the cross. He doubted that a dead man could come back to life. Jesus encouraged Thomas to TOUCH him to verify that it was all true. In a similar way, we, as Christians, are encouraged to confirm the truth of God's Word through the tactile experience of simply HOLDING on to it:



Matthew 20:29-34

And as they were going out from Jericho, a great multitude followed Him. And behold, two blind men sitting by the road, hearing that Jesus was passing by, cried out, saying, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" And the multitude sternly told them to be quiet; but they cried out all the more, saying, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" And Jesus stopped and called them, and said, "What do you want Me to do for you?" They said to Him, "Lord, we want our eyes to be opened." And moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes; and immediately they regained their sight and followed Him.

So how, exactly, can God's existence be confirmed with our sense of touch? Once again we need to expand our understanding of this sensory experience. Have you ever experienced something powerful or moving and found yourself saying, "That was really touching!", or experienced something captivating and said, "Boy, that was gripping!"? If so, you've already started to stretch your understanding of tactile experiences. The Bible recognizes the fact that there are often times when we are so moved by a situation that God has placed in front of us, that we actually 'feel' his presence and find ourselves 'responding' by touching those around us just as God touched us. Jesus found himself in just one such situation in this passage in

Matthew. "Moved" by the situation God placed in front of Him, He then responded by touching the blind men. Skeptics can test the existence of God by allowing themselves to be placed in situations where the need is great and convicting. As they are moved by God to act, the presence of God can be tangibly felt (more on that HERE).

"Biblical Empiricism" encourages us to move beyond the 'material' and investigate the 'immortal' by reasoning with our rational minds; "touching" then becomes the means by which we 'feel God's presence and desire for us to respond in faith'.

Hearing

Most of us as Christians are familiar with the idea of HEARING about God as a way to know, understand or confirm his existence, and the Bible is replete with examples of people who used their auditory senses to hear the truth about God:



Colossians 1:3-6

We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints; because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth

But can God's existence truly be known using our sense of hearing? Is there a broader sense in which we hear God? Let's face it; in the same way that we often use words about 'seeing' to communicate our ability to understand something, we also use words about 'hearing' to communicate similar ideas. Have you ever gained an understanding of something and come to an agreement with someone, only to find yourself saying something similar to "Hey, I hear you!"? Once again, you are using the word 'hear' in a broader sense, aren't you? The Bible encourages us to APPLY what we hear as way of testing the claims that it makes. Skeptics can measure the Biblical claims they hear to find out if they 'ring true' with the way the world really is. Is the nature of man described in the Bible, for example, a true reflection of our experience of humanity (more on that HERE)? If so, the Biblical record will validate itself by "ringing true" with the world around us.

"Biblical Empiricism" encourages us to move beyond the 'material' and investigate the 'immortal' by reasoning with our rational minds; "hearing" then becomes the means by which we 'learn about what God's doing in the community around us'

Tasting

Finally, the Bible actually encourages us to use our sense of taste to experience God.



Psalm 34:7-9

The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear Him, and

rescues them. Taste and see that the LORD is good how blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!

How can our sense of taste be of help to us in determining if God really exists or in understanding His nature? Well, think about it for a minute and try to expand the definition again. Have you ever experienced something you really liked and said something like, “That’s SWEET!”, or experienced something bad and said, “That left a bad taste in my mouth!”? Once again, you are expanding your sensory definitions. Tasting is often used to communicate the idea of ‘sampling’, and it is in this context that the word seems to be used here. God makes several promises in the Bible; just as this passage describes His desire to ‘encamp’ around us and protect us. But how can we know if these promises are true or if God really is capable of protecting us in this way? Skeptics can ‘taste’ or ‘sample’ God’s protection by stepping out in faith, doing what He asks all of us to do, and trusting Him for the result (more on that HERE). Take a small step. Sample. Taste. Then simply examine the results.

“Biblical Empiricism” encourages us to move beyond the ‘material’ and investigate the ‘immaterial’ by reasoning with our rational minds; “tasting” then becomes the means by which we ‘sample the truth claims of the faith to see if they match with reality’

When we use our senses in this way, expanding and broadening the definition of what our senses can do in the first place, we are employing a type of “Biblical Empiricism” that allows us to travel beyond the materialist limits of the ‘natural’ scientific community. By taking this approach, we are able to have a ‘sensory’ experience of the immaterial world. We are able to broaden our definitions and do more than use our senses to examine our natural, material environment; we are able to use our rational minds to make “sense” of the supernatural, immaterial world.



Using the Scientific Method

Now I have several friends who are strict naturalists and they trust the “Scientific Method” as a manner by which they can understand the world around them. The “Scientific Method” is a name that science has given to the approach that it uses to investigate the world, acquire new knowledge, or correct previous misunderstandings. It is based on gathering evidence that is observed empirically; utilizing the five senses. In employing the “Scientific Method”, scientists:

Ask a question or name the issue that they want to study

This starts with a question about something that they observe: How, What, When, Who, Which, Why, or Where?

Propose a hypothesis (an educated guess) that explains what they are seeing
This may take the shape of a proposal such as: "If we do this _____ (proposal), then this _____ (result) will happen."

Test the hypothesis with an experiment

An experiment is then designed to see if the hypothesis is true or false. Scientists

also repeat their experiments several times to make sure that the first results weren't just an accident.

Examine the results and form a conclusion

At the end of the experiment, scientists collect their measurements and examine them analytically to see if their hypothesis is true or false. If the hypothesis was false, they may design a new hypothesis and start all over again.

Tell the world about what they learned

When it's all done, scientists communicate what they learned to the world around them, publishing their results in a way that can be accessed by the people who need the information the most.

As they work through these five steps, scientists use empiricism to ask questions, propose answers and then examine the truth about the world in which they live. Can a similar approach be used to examine the unseen world? What would Jesus say if we brought our skepticism about God to Him and demanded an empirical approach similar to the "Scientific Method"? Well, as it turns out, the Bible does describe how Jesus would respond to such a request. John the Apostle recorded Jesus' reaction to Jewish skeptics:



John 7:14-17

But when it was now the midst of the feast Jesus went up into the temple, and began to teach. The Jews then were astonished, saying, "How has this man become learned, having never been educated?" So Jesus answered them and said, "My teaching is not Mine, but His who sent Me. If anyone is willing to do His will, he will know of the teaching, whether it is of God or whether I speak from Myself."

The Jews had a question, the first inquiry in their own journey through a process that resembles the "Scientific Method": "Is this teaching simply creative rambling from an uneducated man, or is it from God?" Their question really begs another: "Is this guy just a fancy talker or is he something more? Is he speaking as a man, or as God Himself?" Good questions. So, how do we find answers? Well, Jesus proposed an experiment; begin by simply doing what God said. Do what He had already told them to do. See what happens. Step out. Take a chance. Listen and obey. They'd know in short order if His words were just another human opinion or the very words of God. Test them; live them; trust them. They'd know on the backside if He was who He said He was.

Jesus' disciples were familiar with this approach to learning about and experiencing God. On the first day that they met Jesus (recorded earlier in John's Gospel), they asked Him where he was staying. Instead of simply giving them the answer, Jesus said:



John 1:39

"Come and you will see"

Jesus understood their human need to 'see' before they would 'believe', but He offered them an opportunity to step out in faith (to "come"), assuring them that the answer to their question would follow the first active step of obedience. They would "see" AFTER they "trusted". This is God's response to our skepticism. Run an experiment. Step out. Trust. Ask a question, propose a hypothesis. Test the hypothesis by living as though it were true

and see if it matches and explains the reality you are experiencing. Examine the results. You will know if I exist. Then be sure to tell others.

God is not afraid of our questions. Instead, he wants us to experience Him in a way that is powerful and empirical.



The Laboratory for Our Experiment

“Biblical Empiricism” is going to require us to use our minds to expand the definitions we used to hold about what our senses were capable of doing for us. And the “Biblical Method” of understanding and learning is going to require us to experiment by trusting and obeying. This is one strategy that Christianity proposes to experience and confirm the existence of God.

But where are we to conduct these ‘experiments’? What is the setting in which we are to obey, trust, confirm and share these experiences? The “Biblical Laboratory” in which “Biblical Empiricism” is to be employed as part of the “Biblical Method” is simply called the CHURCH. It’s not a place. It’s not a building. It’s a living organism in which all of our senses are employed in order to help each of us determine if God exists and to help each of us experience Him in the fullest:



1 Corinthians 12:12-20

For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot says, "Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. And if the ear says, "Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. If they were all one member, where would the body be? But now there are many members, but one body.

The CHURCH is the place where we, as believers, can come together to stretch, experiment, trust and learn. It is the place where we can first step out in faith, doing what it is that God has called us to do (by serving, loving, trusting and sharing), in order to determine if Jesus’ words are human or divine. The CHURCH is the place where we can surrender ourselves (with all our presuppositions, questions and doubts) to learn if God’s power is real.

God has not called each of us to abandon reason and embrace a ‘blind faith’. God has not called us to stop asking the important questions and become mindless robots. God understands our desire to examine our world empirically. He simply asks us to broaden our definitions beyond strict materialism so that we can use our senses to examine the immaterial world, and He asks us to run experiments that require us to trust Him first, and measure the results afterward